

Supervisor FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



Many changes are affecting our organization, and employees complain often. What communication

techniques can deflect some of this and encourage employees to take responsibility, cope, adapt, and accept the changes?



What's the one area of managing employees where supervisors most often fall short?

Answers



Some employees complain about change, while others don't. Forward-looking employees in the latter group may cope and adapt faster. Be empathic, but a reality check is also appropriate. Realize that accepting change usually includes a bit of denial, so some complaining is expectable. Let employees know you understand their fears and anxieties, but also say, "It's important for all of us to make a conscious decision to figure out how to face the difficulties ahead caused by change." Show your strength. Say, "Let's allow our survival instincts to turn on the creative juices so we'll spot solutions sooner and more clearly." Send a message of expectation of self-reliance. This includes seeking EAP support as needed. Encourage employees to have an attitude that demonstrates focus on what's within their control and letting go of what isn't within their control is part of adapting to change.



Surprisingly, supervisors most often fall short in managing themselves. Most supervisors learn on the job and may learn over time about the multitude of issues associated with managing employees and their personal growth. The Menninger Foundation (America's first private practice in psychiatry) spent time examining the supervisor's role in an institution and published a list of helpful tips. The insightful list addresses self-awareness, managing stress properly, maintaining a healthy perspective on the supervisory role, having a source of mentorship and inputs, understanding how to learn from one's mistakes and failures, learning how to manage one's emotions, and taking time to reflect on events and incidents daily to gather lessons learned. You can see the entire list beginning on page 104 in this monograph from the University of Michigan School of Social Work titled "Essential Supervisory Skills for Child Welfare Managers." http://www.ssw.umich.edu/public/currentProjects/tpcws/articles/EntireEditedManual_9-14-04CE.pdf.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



Employees pick on each other in our workplace. Nastiness, irritability, passive-aggressive communication, negativity, intolerance, and gossip characterize the work environment. How can we begin to eliminate it?



Can you give me a checklist of what I should remember to do after I refer an employee to the EAP?



I'm a new supervisor and see a lot of low energy among employees in my work group. There's no excitement or enthusiasm for what they do. Something isn't right, but no one is talking. How do I find out what's wrong?

Answers



You're describing a pattern of interpersonal abuse among employees referred to as horizontal violence (also lateral violence). This is a type of violence toward one's peers. Characteristically, this form of bullying behavior is emotional, verbal, and covert. It's fraught with many secondary risks, including the propensity toward physical violence, damaged morale, increased risk to personal or customer safety, and lower productivity. Reducing horizontal violence, like any unacceptable behavior, requires labeling it as such and having zero tolerance for it. Ongoing education and awareness is important and helpful in reducing it. It can be a challenge for leadership to identify these behaviors because they're frequently covert and almost indescribable. The upside is that both perpetrators and victims recognize horizontal violence when they experience it. The key is being a manager on whom employees can depend for dealing with it. Your EAP can help you determine what language is helpful and effective when arranging a formal referral.



The purpose of following up is to evaluate and monitor the improved performance of your employee whose original conduct led to the formal EAP referral. Consider the following: 1) schedule regular meetings to review performance after the referral; 2) consult with the EAP immediately if performance problems return or new ones emerge; 3) expect satisfactory performance. Question excuses blaming slow treatment on progress; and 4) keep your focus on improved job performance as evidence of treatment success.



Meet with each employee in a private meeting and ask how things are going. It's the most direct route to discovery. Avoid observing the group, teambuilding, or holding gripe sessions to "get it all out on the table." Don't be mysterious about your intentions. Conduct a few each day until you see everyone. Be up front and say you want to greet everyone individually and learn confidentially about important issues. Ask employees to bring proposed solutions, not just issues. You may notice employees perk up immediately. This results from employees telling their stories and feeling hopeful. Be cautious; this won't last unless you take action. Formulate a plan to address the issues from what you learn. Ask management to give input and approval. Don't forget about the EAP. It can serve as a great sounding board and offer insights because of its unique role as an observer of organizational process.